

14 Ways That Public Schools Do Not Do What Most Of Us Think It Is Their Job To Do

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Educational historian John Gatto, in one of his many talks regarding the American “public education system”, points out that there are actually two education systems operating in our country – *elite* private schools and general *public* schools. He argues that we learn some pretty interesting things if we take a look at a few of the major differences between the two types. In the elite private schools, we actually see something like *education* going on, whereas in the public schools, we see what Gatto feels more comfortable calling *schooling*. Obviously there are other private and charter schools as well, which would not necessarily fall into the category of *elite* and also do not fall into the category of general *public* schools, but for now let us keep in mind just the two major types of schooling, the polarities – elite and public. When we are done looking at the differences, one may then judge toward which end of the spectrum these in-between schools fall. I am listing these 14 ways pretty much verbatim from Gatto’s talk.

(**Editor’s comments** in italics underneath each heading)

Elite schools do the following things, which generally public schools do not:

1. teach a theory of human nature

--spend some time thinking about this one and how such a basic understanding can set the course of an entire lifetime

2. teach a strong sense of the active literacies (like public speaking and writing)

--the Trivium with an emphasis on Rhetoric does this

3. encourage insight into social and political institutions

--modern Civics courses fail us, citizen’s intelligence projects are needed to fill the gaps

4. provide training in politeness and civility

--as with all of these, imagine the implications of the accumulation of people acting under such ideals throughout society. . .compare that to the average we see in America today

5. encourage independent work

6. the physical sports taught are taught to confer grace, not brutality

--modern research in neuro-plasticity also shows that neurons grow/re-wire faster when learning something physically, so combine the Trivium studies with something like Martial Arts, Chen Tai Chi, Ballet/Dancing, sports, etc and you have a good recipe for powerful, transformative brain change

7. teach a theory of access to places and people (give them a high locus-of-control)

--this is huge and requires a book devoted to the subject, refer to some of Gatto's work for examples and devise your own

8. encourage personal responsibility

--to me, this also implies not wasting our time in superfluous activities to the point of hubris (the typical video game player, drug taker, tv watcher, etc) simply because the fact we are here and alive and conscious means we should be doing Good Works with our time

9. encourage individuals to develop a personal code of standards

--we need people thinking more and more about virtuous conduct and Right Action

10. encourage familiarity with masterpieces in art and music (cultural capital)

11. teach accurate observation and recording of experiences (drawing or writing sharpens perception)

--refer to Alex Grey's The Mission of Art for further insights

12. encourage the ability to deal with all sorts of challenges (different for different individuals)

--this is where understanding the uniqueness of your child is necessary, but also, life throws us all curve balls constantly so hadn't we all better get used to it?

13. teach a habit of caution in reasoning to conclusions

--CRUCIAL for a well-functioning society

14. encourage a constant development and testing of prior judgements

--here again it is worth repeating to you the idea that when inculcated in millions of individuals, such perspectives and ways of conduct accumulate throughout generations creating more and more opportunities for "good seeds" to sprout, flourish, and propagate

I will let the reader judge for him or herself how much of these their local school does and whether or not these are essential to the school experience. Having attended a smattering of schools growing up – some rural public, some urban Catholic, some suburban public, some private boarding school, Catholic university, and then Lutheran university – i can say that there are very clear differences in my mind between all of these schools. Having said this – that all schools will have their qualitative differences – I also want to note that the Catholic school experience of my youth was far superior to the rural public, and met a few more of the above criteria than did the rural public school. Still, neither could be classified as being even close to the *elite* category. The Catholic school still retained enough of the elements of general “public education” to be somewhat ineffective in teaching to how I learn. As noted above, i would classify the high school I attended for the first three years as suburban. Even though it was somewhat rural compared to many high schools, there was a significant amount of money and culture in the area, and thus slightly more of a focus on academics than in the strictly rural school I earlier attended. The private boarding school I attended my senior year of high school far surpassed any of the schooling I received in my youth. Though it still could not be considered *elite*, it hit a few more of the points on Gatto’s list. Both of the universities I attended, the Catholic and the Lutheran, came even closer to meeting all the points on Gatto’s list. Though both universities emphasized many of the points listed above, the general environment of the schools was not *elite*. The opportunities to hit all of the 14 points were there, but it just was not what was typically done. I was the exception to the rule for taking advantage of most of theses opportunities.

